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SPIRITUALITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS: AN EMERGING VISION FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

ABSTRACT
The rise of science over the past four centuries has undeniably brought with it a wealth of extraordinary intellectual and practical achievements, but it has also arguably contributed to a host of serious and worsening societal problems including destructive commercial exploitation of our planet's natural resources with its cumulative negative effects on the environment and global climate; relentless commodification, marketing and consumption; extreme and increasing inequity in the distribution of wealth and opportunity; the prevalence of zero-sum "transactionalist" approaches to relationships at scales ranging from individuals to nations; widespread militarism and the ever-present threat of nuclear holocaust; and the pervasive "disenchantment" of contemporary civilization. Numerous social commentators have connected these problems directly or indirectly with the deep split between science and spirituality that has been fostered in particular over the past century by advocates of *physicalism*, a philosophical doctrine anchored in late nineteenth-century physics that claims to speak for science as a whole and that sees nothing in our human spiritual traditions but irrational vestiges of our intellectual childhood. In this paper I will describe how a path has opened up toward a radically different but still science-based picture of reality, one that takes consciousness as ontologically fundamental and celebrates human spiritual experiences and capacities, that is more consistent than physicalism itself with leading-edge science, and that can potentially help prevent our struggling modern civilization from sleep-walking into self-annihilation.

KEYWORDS
consciousness, spirituality, physicalism, dualism, dual-aspect monism, idealism, brain/mind theory, psychical research, near-death experiences, mystical experiences

Background

The science-based conception of reality that currently constitutes the received wisdom of opinion elites worldwide is *physicalism*, an austere philosophical descendant of the *materialism* of previous centuries. It comes in a variety of subtly different flavors, but its underlying core ideas are really quite simple. Anchored to the mature classical physics of the late nineteenth century, this

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doctrine pictures reality as a whole in much the same way that foundational scientists such as Galileo and Newton conceived of its physical aspects alone – i.e., setting aside consciousness and all other things mental or spiritual (which they themselves took very seriously) for the sake of progress in physics as the prototypical observational and mathematical science. On this view, in its modern philosophical form, *all* facts are determined by *physical* facts alone. Space and time exist absolutely and independently, providing a ready-made container for everything that exists or happens. The world we experience consists at bottom of tiny bits of some sort of solid, enduring, insentient, self-existent material "stuff" moving about in accordance with mathematical laws under the influence of fields of force, and all else gets manufactured somehow from that basic stuff. Some of what we know, and our capacities to learn more, are built-in genetically, as complex resultants of biological evolution. Everything else comes to us by way of our sensory surfaces, through energetic exchanges with the environment of types already largely understood. All aspects of mind and consciousness are created by (or in some mysterious way identical to, or supervenient upon) neurophysiological processes occurring in our brains. We are nothing but immensely complicated biological machines, operating deterministically. Our everyday experiences of enduring and purposeful selfhood, seemingly supported by mental causation and at least a modicum of free will, belong only to a pre-scientific "folk psychology," and in reality are just illusory by-products of the grinding of our neural machinery. We are "meat computers" in artificial intelligence pioneer Marvin Minsky's chilling phrase, or "moist robots" in its Dilbert parody. Furthermore, and contrary to the teachings of most world religions, the fact that mind and consciousness are entirely the products of neurophysiological processes occurring in our brains entails that there is no possibility whatsoever for postmortem survival of any sort. On a more cosmic scale we see no sign of formal or final causes or indeed any sort of transcendent order. On the contrary, the overall scheme of nature appears in the end to be utterly devoid of purpose or meaning. To paraphrase physics Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg, the more we learn about the universe the more it all seems pointless.

Views of this bleak sort have permeated all "advanced" societies and fueled the pervasive disenchantment of the modern world with all of its evident and pressing ills. They have also accumulated enormous cultural momentum and become essentially self–perpetuating by deliberately and systematically gaining near-total control of key structures of modern society such as our educational institutions and the media. Over the past century our secondary schools, colleges, and universities have in effect mostly become advocates for the prevailing physicalist worldview, which by now not only dominates mainstream *scientific* disciplines such as biology, neuroscience, psychology, and the social sciences, but also has destructively colonized other academic specialties including the humanities in general and—perhaps most shockingly— religious studies in particular. There can be little doubt that it has also contributed to the steep worldwide modern decline in traditional forms of religious belief

with their associated capacities to support ethical and moral order (Smith et al. 2025). Indeed, recent years have witnessed scathing attacks on religion by defenders of physicalism such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Steven Pinker, who clearly regard themselves and current mainstream science as reliably marshaling the intellectual virtues of reason and objectivity against retreating forces of irrational authority and superstition. For them the truth of physicalism has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt, and to think anything different is necessarily to abandon centuries of scientific progress, unleash the black flood of occultism, and revert to primitive supernaturalist beliefs characteristic of bygone ages. These attacks by prominent academics on traditional faiths, especially the Abrahamic faiths, have in turn engendered pushback in the various forms of fundamentalist religious fanaticism we observe with depressing frequency in the daily news.

The "Sursem" Project

Many academics, including myself, however, do not embrace the physicalist worldview and its dismissive attitude toward spiritual realities. I speak here in particular as the leader of a long-running project – initially organized in 1998 by Michael Murphy, co-founder of Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California and Director of its Center for Theory and Research (CTR) – whose members take a starkly different view: we think it requires astonishing hubris to dismiss summarily the collective experience and wisdom of our forebears, including persons widely recognized as pillars of all human civilization, and we believe that the single most important task confronting all of modernity is that of *meaningful* reconciliation of science and spirituality.

I hasten to add that for us any such "reconciliation" involves much more than merely segregating science and religion in their current forms into hermetically sealed "magisteria" where they can go their separate ways in uneasy coexistence, as originally decreed by Descartes and recently advocated again by Stephen Jay Gould. Instead, following Alfred North Whitehead, we think "the clash is a sign that there are wider truths and finer perspectives within which a reconciliation of a deeper religion and a more subtle science is to be found" (Whitehead 1967/1925: 185), and that emerging developments within science itself are leading inexorably toward an enlarged conception of reality, one that can address human spiritual needs while rejecting untenable "overbeliefs" of the kinds routinely targeted by critics of the world's institutional religions. We advocate no specific religious faith, and we aspire to remain anchored in science while expanding its horizons. We are attempting in this way to find a middle path between the starkly polarized fundamentalisms – religious *and* scientific – that have dominated recent public discourse. Both science and religion, we believe, must evolve.

In this paper I will summarize our efforts to date in this direction. Over its decades-long duration our project has involved over fifty participants in all, roughly twenty of whom were actively engaged during any given year. Our core

membership has remained largely constant, but as the project evolved some members dropped out for various reasons while others were recruited to help us address specific new issues and needs as these came into focus. Each year typically included at least one intensive five-day face-to-face meeting of currently active members in the magnificent Pacific Oceanside ambience provided by Esalen, supplemented by occasional smaller meetings elsewhere and by extensive background interactions among particular members as needed.

Our membership has always been uncommonly diverse, including social, biological, and physical scientists, scholars of religion, philosophers, and historians of science among others, but in general terms most of us are scientifically minded adults with broad interests who think of ourselves as at least somewhat "spiritual," although not "religious" in any conventional sense, and who are profoundly skeptical of the currently dominant physicalist worldview but equally wary of uncritical embrace of any of the world's major faiths with their often conflicting beliefs and decidedly mixed historical records.

We focused initially on the various forms of existing evidence for postmortem survival, our fellowship thereby acquiring the nickname "Sursem" for "survival seminar." As Mike Murphy had clearly recognized, survival is a watershed issue theoretically, because the beliefs common to traditional faiths cannot be true if the physicalist worldview is correct, and yet there already exists – mostly unknown to believers, skeptics, and the general public alike – a large body of substantial evidence indicating that survival in personal form *does* at least sometimes occur.

By the end of our second annual meeting, it had become clear that although we held somewhat differing views on the survival issue itself, we were unanimous in believing that the prevailing physicalism is fundamentally flawed and needs to be superseded by a more comprehensive science-based picture of reality. Accordingly, we formulated a two-stage plan that has constituted my primary occupation for the past twenty-five years and that has already resulted in three large books (Kelly et al. 2007; Kelly, Crabtree and Marshall 2015; Kelly and Marshall 2021). What I want to do next is to convey an overall sense of what we have done and what we have accomplished (so far).

Irreducible Mind

The central goal of the first phase was to assemble in one place a large amount of empirical evidence for human psychophysical capacities that clearly defy or strongly resist explanation in conventional physicalist terms, and here I should supply some relevant philosophical background. Brain events and mental events normally seem strongly correlated, of course, and that universally accepted fact has generally been taken as unambiguously supporting the "production" model of brain-mind relations – in a nutshell, the idea that brain creates mind, full stop. Now, it is indisputable that your consciousness can be radically altered if you get hit sufficiently hard on the head, drink too much, or develop an invasive brain tumor, and such facts clearly demonstrate that physical changes

can causally impact your mental life. But what about causation in the opposite direction? Suppose for example that you develop an urge to raise your hand in order to ask a question, and your arm rises into the air – is that not an example of something mental causing a physical effect? "No," says the physicalist, "you've simply misunderstood what's actually going on. That intention or idea of yours, you see, was really just a pattern of neuroelectric activity in your brain. That *physical* process is what caused your arm to move – no problem!"

That sort of argument is impossible to rebut under everyday circumstances such as raising an arm, but it can be overcome by identifying empirically validated psychophysical phenomena that cannot plausibly be accomplished by the unaided brain. That is precisely what we set out to do in the first phase of our project, revisiting in light of a century of subsequent research many of the phenomena discussed by William James's colleague and friend F. W. H. Myers (1903) in his masterwork *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (henceforth *HP*).

First on any list of relevant capacities come supernormal or "psi" phenomena such as extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK, or "mind over matter") that are studied in experimental parapsychology and in psychical research more generally. The defining attribute of all such phenomena is that information somehow passes between an organism and its environment despite the presence of a barrier of some sort (such as isolation in space and/or time between ESP targets and their would-be percipients) which on widely accepted physical principles should prevent that from happening. The conflict with physicalism is extremely clear in this arena, and that undoubtedly accounts for the extraordinary hostility the subject often provokes in persons for whom physicalist ideology amounts to a secular faith. Here I will simply state my informed and considered opinion as an experimental scientist who has worked in this area for decades: serious scientific effort on this subject has now been going on for something over 150 years, beginning even before the formation of the Society for Psychical Research in England in 1882, and the accumulated evidence from large numbers of case and field studies plus something like a couple of thousand experimental studies should be more than sufficient, in my opinion, to convince any reasonably open-minded person who takes the trouble to study it that these phenomena really do exist as facts of nature, and that our science-based worldview *must* therefore expand in some way in order to accommodate them. Let me also underscore here the irony that it is precisely the strength of the evidence for psi phenomena generally that undermines the empirical case for postmortem survival! That is, the only credible explanations for the direct evidence of multiple kinds that now exists for postmortem survival of human mind and personality involve either survival itself or psi processes involving only living persons (such as a medium, for example). Both horns of this dilemma are lethal to the physicalist worldview.

My co-authors all shared my own positive attitude toward psychical research, and we all wanted to include it somehow in our book, but at the same time we did not want ours to be a book mainly or even in substantial part about this

subject. Instead, we incorporated the entire literature of psychical research by reference and provided an annotated bibliography pointing to what we view as especially significant parts of that enormous literature.

Now, many mainstream cognitive scientists and neuroscientists would like to imagine that psi phenomena represent a uniquely intractable anomaly that can simply be set aside or quarantined and safely ignored while we continue to advance triumphantly on all other fronts. That is emphatically not the case, however, and our 800-page first book *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* (Kelly et al. 2007, henceforth *IM)* goes on to examine in detail a number of other problematic phenomena. These include, for example, manifestations of extreme psychophysiological influence such as highly localized and specific placebo effects, "stigmata" (spontaneous replications of the wounds of Christ on the bodies of exceptionally fervent and imaginative devotees), and hypnotically induced blisters of pre-specified geometric shape; prodigious forms of memory and calculation; the concurrent existence of multiple and overlapping centers of consciousness associated with single human bodies (particularly in cases where a normally hidden or subliminal personality is conspicuously more gifted and knowledgeable – or suffers different allergies, or requires different eyeglass prescriptions – than the everyday personality itself); powerful and transformative "near-death experiences" (NDEs), especially ones occurring under extreme physiological conditions such as deep general anesthesia and/or cardiac arrest in which no experience whatsoever should be possible according to contemporary mainstream neuroscience; genius-level creativity on the staggering scale of persons such as the Indian mathematician Ramanujan; and life-changing mystical experiences whether spontaneous, induced by psychedelics such as psilocybin or LSD, emerging in conjunction with transformative practices such as intense meditative disciplines of one or another sort, or precipitated by a close brush with death.

Collectively, these well-documented phenomena greatly compound what contemporary philosophers of mind have increasingly recognized as the severe explanatory difficulties posed for physicalism by perfectly ordinary, everyday properties of our conscious mental life. These properties include, for example, our ability to grasp general word meanings and to deploy them in an infinite variety of semantically appropriate contexts, including metaphorical contexts; the "intentionality" or "aboutness" of language and thought; the presentation of conscious experience in the form of unified wholes observed from a subjective point of view; and perhaps most crucially, the qualitative "feels" of consciousness – the "what it's like" to experience a particular sensation or to be in a particular conscious state. The plain fact is that we currently have no understanding whatsoever of how a consciousness with these properties could be manufactured by physical processes occurring in brains, and recent theoretical work in philosophy of mind has convinced many that we can never achieve one.

Physics itself has of course moved on as well, and the classical conception of a material universe that was introduced for methodological reasons by Galileo

and Newton and developed to near-perfection by the end of the nineteenth century was radically undermined early in the twentieth by the rise of quantum and relativity theories. These seismic events in modern physics have been easy for most of us to ignore, because they are associated with happenings on spatial and temporal scales so different from those of everyday life, but they too have eroded the *scientific* foundation of the prevailing physicalist worldview as described above. That worldview, I repeat, is not itself part of science but a metaphysics, a *philosophical* doctrine that is in fact no longer consistent with our deepest physical science.

In summary, I believe that *IM* accomplished two main things: first, it added a rich new *empirical* dimension to a rising and multifaceted tide of dissatisfaction with physicalism as a philosophical doctrine. Second and more fundamentally, it provided strong support for a radical alternative to the conventional *production* model of brain-mind relations. On that conventional view, which of course dominates today's psychology and neuroscience, everyday consciousness is all the consciousness each of us has, created and supported by unconscious neurophysiological processes in our brains, and encased within our skulls. Myers and James, however – in company with philosophical colleagues such as Henri Bergson and F. C. S. Schiller – long ago developed a very different and much richer model of the human psyche, one that I and many others believe is closer to the truth and merits intensified attention today.

James made the essential logical point in his Ingersoll lecture at Harvard (James 1898/1900): the strong correlations normally holding between mental events and brain events –which everybody accepts, and which have routinely been interpreted as supporting the production model – can in fact be interpreted at least equally well in terms of *transmission* or *permission* or *transduction* or *filtering* of conscious mentation originating outside the brain. Such models portray the brain not as the *generator* of mind and consciousness but as an organ of adaptation to the demands of everyday life, in large part a sensorimotor interface that under normal conditions selects, focuses, channels, and constrains the operations of a mind and consciousness inherently far greater in capacities and scope than the everyday conscious mind itself. As Myers himself put it (*HP,* vol. 1: 12, 15): "There exists a more comprehensive consciousness, a profounder faculty, which for the most part remains potential only…but from which the consciousness and faculty of earth-life are mere selections…[N]o Self of which we can here have cognizance is in reality more than a fragment of a larger Self, – revealed in a fashion at once shifting and limited through an organism not so framed as to afford it full manifestation." The everyday or "supraliminal self" in Myers's theory is simultaneously both itself and part of a larger consciousness, the "Subliminal Self" that is the source of supernormal phenomena and that survives bodily death.

James argues specifically that although this alternative understanding of brain-mind relations may at first seem purely metaphorical and difficult to understand, it is in reality no more so than the production model itself, and it has the great advantage of potentially explaining a variety of things beyond

the reach of that model such as the phenomena then being uncovered by Myers and his colleagues in psychical research. Note also that it potentially solves the "hard problem" of consciousness by locating the source of consciousness outside the brain, and that it circumvents the logical objection to postmortem survival based on supposed one-way causal dependence of mind and consciousness on brain activity.

The evidence we assembled in *IM* demonstrates clearly, I believe, that the correlations between mind and brain are actually much looser than generally supposed, and can be conceptualized in the alternative fashion of permission or filter models without doing violence to other parts of our scientific understanding including leading-edge neuroscience and physics (see especially *IM*, Chapter 9). More specifically, evidence for the expanded picture of human personality advanced by Myers and James has grown far stronger in the century following their deaths. Unfortunately, their pioneering efforts were soon pushed aside by the rise of radical behaviorism with its self-conscious aping of the methods of classical physics, and that influence persists in modified form even now in mainstream cognitive neuroscience (see *IM*, Chapter 1). In our view, psychology has taken an extremely lengthy albeit probably necessary detour, and is only now becoming capable of building upon the broader empirical foundation that our predecessors had already created so long ago.

The normally hidden region of conscious mind, the "Subliminal Self" of F. W. H. Myers or "The More" of William James, is the wellspring of the latent human potentials which historically have comprised Esalen's main practical focus. But it is especially the *transpersonal* products of this region with their deep psychological and historical interconnections – genius in its highest expressions, powerful and transformative mystical experiences occurring under an astonishing variety of circumstances, and the various forms of paranormal or psi phenomena including postmortem survival – which jointly demonstrate that physicalism must give way to some richer form of metaphysics. What is at issue here, I hasten to add, is *not* whether we will have metaphysics – because we inevitably *will,* whether aware of it or not – but whether we will have good metaphysics or bad.

Beyond Physicalism

Irreducible Mind required plenty of hard work, but it was actually the easier part of our Sursem project, consisting mainly of the clerical-type task of digging enormous amounts of relevant information out of the past century or so of refereed biomedical literature and assembling it all in one place in coherent form. Far more difficult is the philosophical part, which is to identify a possible successor to physicalism: if the world is not constituted in the manner described by physicalism, that is, how might it be constituted differently, in order that the "rogue phenomena" catalogued in *IM* – along with everything else we find in nature—can occur? I took a first stab at this question in the final chapter of *IM,* bracketing a range of possibilities from a modernized form

of interactive dualism to an idealist monism along the lines pioneered by Alfred North Whitehead, and became convinced that scientifically and philosophically respectable alternatives to physicalism are definitely available. The central task for the second phase of our project thus became that of examining a wider variety of alternatives in greater detail and attempting to identify the most promising path(s) forward.

As we began to work in this direction we recognized that a central element of our strategy should be to pay special attention to worldviews both past and present that explicitly attempt to accommodate at least some "rogue phenomena" of the relevant sorts. We approached this comparative material not with the expectation that any of the systems we would be able to study would contain all the right answers, ready-made, but in the interest of prospecting for common themes and useful clues as to how best to advance our theoretical purposes.

These more theoretical efforts initially resulted in a second large volume, *Beyond Physicalism: Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality* (Kelly, Crabtree, and Marshall 2015; henceforth *BP)*, also published by Rowman & Littlefield. It includes a survey by philosopher Michael Grosso of the long and illustrious intellectual history in the West of permission-type conceptual frameworks, ranging from pre-Socratic and Platonic philosophers to the Neoplatonic revival inspired by Vico, Ficino and others in Renaissance Italy, to the Romantic tradition in poetry, literature and philosophy, to Myers, James, and Bergson around the beginning of the twentieth century, and finally to more contemporary figures such as philosopher C. D. Broad, psychologist Cyril Burt, chemist and discoverer of LSD, Albert Hofmann, and the novelist and social theorist Aldous Huxley. Scholars of religion in our group argued in general terms for the theoretical importance of mystical experiences, construing them as providing windows into normally inaccessible parts of reality (Paul Marshall), and developed individual chapters on specific mystically-informed religious philosophies including Neoplatonism (Greg Shaw), Yoga and Vedanta (Ian Whicher), and Kashmir Shaivism (Loriliai Biernacki). We also devoted several chapters to relevant parts of the Western metaphysical tradition, including one by Paul Marshall on a modified version of Leibniz's monadology that enhances its power to help make sense of our rogue phenomena; one by Adam Crabtree on the contributions of William James's friend and colleague Charles Sanders Peirce, who took both psi and survival seriously and believed his metaphysics could explain them; and one by Eric Weiss that combines an updated version of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy with insights derived from the modern Tantric philosopher and sage Sri Aurobindo.

In keeping with our general orientation, we also emphasized contributions from the scientific side. Neuroscientist David Presti and I, for example, examined permission or filter models from a psychobiological point of view, again concentrating on psi phenomena, flights of genius, and mystical experiences as key expressions of the deeper resources of the psyche, and attempted to understand what sorts of brain conditions might permit or actively encourage access to these resources, and why. Parenthetically, one of the most exciting

practical implications of our project, going forward, is precisely that conventional tools of brain-mind research, skillfully applied, should enable us not only to identify brain conditions conducive to the expression of these normally latent capacities, but also to develop improved technological means for instantiating or stabilizing them. What we are doing, that is, also has an important *applications* dimension, potentially contributing to more effective harnessing of these elusive human potentials for personal and collective good.

BP also includes chapters by several prominent physicists: quantum theorist Henry Stapp presents his physics-based model of mind-brain interaction and explores its possible extensions to rogue phenomena including psi and survival; quantum theorist and cognitive scientist/philosopher Harald Atmanspacher describes the dual-aspect monism of Wolfgang Pauli and Carl Gustav Jung, and shows how it leads naturally to a theoretical taxonomy of exceptional experiences matching those actually occurring in clinical practice; and Bernard Carr, a cosmologist and former president of the Society for Psychical Research, provides expositions of his own and other forms of "hyperdimensional" theory, again emphasizing their compatibility with leading-edge science (in this case with relativity and string theory) and their potential to help make sense of rogue phenomena including psi, survival, and various types of altered states of consciousness including mystical experiences.

The overall sense we developed during this initial period of more philosophical work was that theorizing based upon an adequately comprehensive empirical foundation – i.e., one that includes our various rogue phenomena along with the problems posed by consciousness itself –inevitably moves into metaphysical territory shared in part with the world's traditional religious faiths. In general terms, we concluded, what seems to be needed philosophically is some realist form of *idealism* – essentially the metaphysical opposite of the prevailing physicalism.

In the concluding section of *BP* I made a preliminary case for one particular system of that type, following the trajectory of William James in the last decade of his life. Although this is not widely realized or remembered today, James specifically and repeatedly acknowledges in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that he is using Myers's model of personality to provide explanations for all of the religious phenomena he discusses, treating them primarily as incursions from the "near side" of Myers's subliminal region. Then in his last great work, *A Pluralistic Universe* (James 1971/1909), he begins to explore what might lie on the "far side" of that same region. Encouraged by persons such as Gustav Fechner and Henri Bergson, James in effect generalizes Myers's well-grounded *psychological* theory of the Subliminal Self in the direction of a *metaphysics* which postulates a nested hierarchy of progressively more inclusive consciousnesses, culminating in one that while "highest" in some sense is different in humanly important ways from the abstract, static, timeless, all-encompassing, and already-perfect One –characterized by James as "the unintelligible pantheistic monster" (p. 271) – postulated by various forms of absolute idealism that were still popular in England at that time. James points out,

for example, that his highest consciousness is more like us and hence perhaps more accessible to us, and that since it is not all-inclusive it need not bear full responsibility for the problem of evil.

As I observed in Chapter 14 of *BP* this late trajectory brought James very close to an idealist metaphysics that is well known and increasingly respected in theological circles, and that should rank high among the candidates to succeed physicalism: specifically, I argued that emerging developments in science and comparative religion, viewed in relation to centuries of philosophy and natural theology, point toward some form of "evolutionary panentheism" (a subset of the larger family of idealist positions) as our current best guess about the metaphysically ultimate nature of things.

In brief, panentheisms in general attempt to split the difference between classical theisms and pantheisms, conceiving of an ultimate consciousness or God as pervading or even constituting the manifest world, as in pantheisms, but also as having some sort of higher-level mental structure, as in theisms (see especially Hartshorne and Reese 2000/1953). As Biernacki and Clayton (2013) had already shown, panentheistic elements or tendencies are clearly present, even when not well-developed, in essentially all of the world's traditional faiths. The version I tentatively embraced in *BP* further conceives the highest consciousness as in some sense slowly waking up to itself as evolution of more complex biological forms enables fuller expression of its inherent capacities. Most importantly, from a practical point of view, it holds that we humans are intimately linked with that ultimate reality in the depths of our individual psyches, that we can connect with it and experience it directly in a variety of ways, and that we can potentially aid the global evolutionary process through our own conscious choices and efforts. As F. W. H. Myers himself more succinctly and poetically expressed it in the final sentences of *HP*: "That which lies at the root of each of us lies at the root of the Cosmos too. Our struggle is the struggle of the Universe itself; and the very Godhead finds fulfillment through our upward–striving souls" (Vol. 2, p. 277).

Mike Murphy and I portrayed evolutionary panentheism in the concluding section of *BP* as an emerging metaphysical vision—a "stealth worldview" in Mike's apt phrase – which potentially integrates the long philosophical tradition of idealist and dual-aspect monisms with shared lessons from the world's mystical traditions, *and* with the incipient expansion of science itself as previewed in *IM*—in effect, an expanded science-based worldview that can embrace and potentiate empirical realities of spiritual sorts while remaining faithful to science.

The consensus we developed to first approximation in *BP* naturally invited further elaboration of the identified worldviews and examination of additional systems of related type, as well as empirical explorations involving many kinds of research (especially important going forward, in my view, will be laboratory research on meditation and psychedelics as gateways into mystical-type states of consciousness). A great deal obviously remained to be done to narrow the identified general class of worldviews to its most viable member(s), but we gradually became confident that we were headed in the right overall direction.

Theoretical interlude: taming idealism's alleged "inverse hard problem"

Before proceeding further, I wish to insert here a brief account of my own movement toward idealism, because I think it may help others make the same difficult journey. I am an experimental psychologist and neuroscientist by training, and not by any stretch of the imagination a professional philosopher. I was undoubtedly a conventional physicalist most of the way through graduate school, like virtually all of my fellow students, although most of us were at best only dimly conscious of that fact. The physicalist worldview was just an implicit part of the intellectual environment, so to speak, like water to a fish – something from which one absorbed things passively, as if by osmosis. I was subsequently roused from my dogmatic slumbers, however, by prolonged first-hand encounters with what I could not fail to recognize as compelling experimental evidence for the reality of psi phenomena that I knew were unexplainable in conventional physical terms.

Finding myself driven by evidence to abandon physicalism, I gravitated initially toward interactive dualism as the most natural and comfortable philosophic alternative (and see *IM* chapter 9 for a serious attempt of my own to justify it). I should also confess that even now, when I am functioning as a working psychologist, I lapse readily into that way of thinking, with its residual if only partial allegiance to the physicalist conception of nature. I eventually became convinced, however, that once one abandons physicalist monism there is no tenable stopping point short of some form of idealism. This was by no means an easy journey, because like most other scientifically trained modern persons steeped in the physicalist worldview, I initially found idealism extremely counterintuitive, notwithstanding the plain historical fact that idealist philosophical systems recur widely in mystically-informed Eastern thought and have risen to prominence repeatedly albeit temporarily here in the West.

One standard physicalist objection in particular held me back until I finally recognized that it is actually much weaker than I had originally thought. That objection goes like this: "OK, it's true that we physicalists are having a difficult time explaining how the brain creates consciousness and all that, but we'll probably succeed eventually, and anyway idealists have a problem that is exactly the opposite and equally intractable: specifically, *how does consciousness create matter?*"

The correct response here is to recognize that there is a subtle but crucial asymmetry between the two challenges: on the physicalist side we know beyond doubt that consciousness exists as a fact of nature because we all have and experience it directly, and a large amount of evidence and argument have by now accumulated showing that it cannot be explained in physicalist terms; on the idealist side, however, the challenge has not been posed in quite the correct way. "Matter" and other elements of classical physics are conceptual entities that we laboriously developed over a period of centuries in order to explain various sorts of empirical regularities we discovered in our experience of the

natural world, but we now know from more modern developments in physics itself that matter *as classically conceived* does not really exist. What the idealist needs to explain, that is, is not "matter" as classically conceived but those regularities themselves, and as I will explain shortly that is precisely what a number of my idealist-leaning colleagues are attempting to do. Conceptual frameworks such as theirs cannot be ruled out *a priori*, as many are reflexively inclined to do, but must be judged in terms of their ability to help us better understand both in general terms and in the necessary realist detail the world we live in. It remains to be seen, of course, how far any of them can actually be taken. The central question that remains to be answered, in my view, is whether a full-fledged realist-idealist monism will ultimately be needed, or whether some sort of panpsychism or cosmopsychism or dual-aspect monism that attempts to extend the conventional physicalist picture by incorporating consciousness and mentality in some less radical fashion will serve us better in the end. Conceptions of these latter sorts are represented elsewhere in this special issue.

Consciousness Unbound

Our continuing efforts have already led to a third volume, *Consciousness Unbound: Liberating Mind from the Tyranny of Materialism* (Kelly and Marshall 2021; henceforth *CU*) which carries forward the empirical and theoretical themes of its predecessors. Part I provides state-of-the-science summaries for some of the empirical phenomena that we view as especially challenging for theoreticians. The first, by Bruce Greyson on near-death experiences, presents an overview of decades of NDE research, using some impressive recent cases as illustrations. He also discusses evidence for and against prominent attempts to explain NDEs in reductive physicalist terms, and highlights the remarkable transformative power of NDEs as evidenced by subsequent spiritual growth and emergence of psi abilities. The emphasis throughout is on key findings from NDE research, such as the common occurrence of deep and transformative NDEs in conjunction with cardiac arrest, suggesting that mind can function independently of the brain and thus possibly continue in some form after death.

Next is a chapter by Jim Tucker on "Cases of the Reincarnation Type" (CORT). Over the past six decades – beginning with psychiatrist Ian Stevenson, who founded the research group at the University of Virginia to which Bruce, Jim and I belong – researchers have investigated children's reports of memories of previous lives, cumulatively studying more than 2,500 such cases from around the world. In many of these a child's statements have proved accurate and detailed for an individual who lived and died in the recent past, someone about whom the current family knew nothing before the child began reporting or enacting the memories. The children are often barely able to speak when they begin describing a past life, and they often show unusual affect or behaviors that appear appropriately related to that life, such as an intense fear of water when the previous personality had died by drowning. Some also display extremely unusual birthmarks or birth defects corresponding to

fatal wounds suffered by the previous personality. The chapter also includes descriptions of two recent and strong American cases and some representative findings from the cumulative database.

The final Part I chapter, by Bob Rosenberg on precognition, surveys case-study and experimental evidence and discusses the two great philosophical issues – causality and free will – that lurk behind it. The causal conundrum arises from the conventional view that the future does not yet exist and therefore cannot be the cause of any present perception or intuition, while the problem about free will arises from the physicalist notion of a predetermined and hence potentially precognizable future, which seems to preclude it. Both concerns are inextricably intertwined with each other and with our understanding of *time*, a key frontier of contemporary physics.

Part II of *CU* explores further horizons on the theoretical side, introducing five additional non-physicalist conceptual frameworks or metaphysical perspectives that are closely related conceptually to those previously presented in *IM* and *BP*. A first chapter by Jung scholar Roderick Main demonstrates clearly that late in Jung's career, under the impact of mystical experiences of his own that occurred in conjunction with a near-fatal heart attack, he himself moved sharply in the direction of evolutionary panentheism as his ultimate metaphysical position.

The following chapter by Max Velmans describes his "Reflexive Monism" – a science-driven version of dual-aspect monism with clear affinities to the Indian philosophical tradition. This model provides a nonreductive, integrated way of understanding in general terms how the first-person phenomenology of ordinary conscious experience relates to the conventional third-person understanding of mind within current psychology and neuroscience. In his *CU* chapter, Max goes on for the first time to consider ways in which his model can be extended to accommodate extraordinary experiences as well as ordinary ones, thereby deepening its convergence with Indian philosophical thought (see also Max's contribution to the present special issue).

The next chapter, by Glenn Magee, argues that a slightly modified version of Hegel's metaphysics provides an illuminating, comprehensive, and intellectually satisfying account of the nature of mystical experience. This account of mystical experience also sheds light on paranormal phenomena, which Hegel himself accepted as genuine. Indeed, Hegel's metaphysics entails that paranormal phenomena are to be expected, and not at all mysterious – a position which in fact was Hegel's own.

A chapter by computer-scientist-turned-philosopher Bernardo Kastrup presents the ontology of his "analytic idealism," according to which a spatially unbound, universal phenomenal consciousness is nature's sole fundamental ground, all natural phenomena being ultimately reducible to that universal consciousness. Bernardo argues explicitly that analytic idealism is superior to physicalism on the basis of internal logical consistency, parsimony, and empirical adequacy, and points to a broad pattern of empirical observations in psychiatry and neuroscience that is suggestive of idealism and consistent with

psychological permission or filter models. He also sketches how our various rogue phenomena can be understood as natural occurrences having a coherent basis within his idealist ontology. Parenthetically, Bernardo is also the creator of Essentia Foundation, the website of which contains numerous excellent papers and interviews relevant to the subjects under discussion in this special issue.

The final *CU* theory chapter, by physicist and microelectronics pioneer Federico Faggin (inventor of the silicon gate junction and designer/builder of several of the first microprocessors), sketches another new science-driven conceptual framework in which consciousness is ontologically fundamental and our rogue phenomena find a natural place. Faggin had a powerful spontaneous mystical experience decades ago which immediately convinced him that consciousness must somehow be brought into our understanding of reality at a foundational level, and with help from theoretical physicist Giacomo D'Ariano he is working out a possible way of doing so. Specifically, they are jointly developing a model in which classical physics derives from quantum physics, quantum physics derives from quantum information, and quantum information itself is grounded in consciousness (D'Ariano and Faggin 2022). A central postulate is that quantum information, associated with "pure" states of quantum systems, corresponds to conscious experiences of those systems and in fact represents the interiority of nature in general, from the quantum fields associated with elementary particles on up. Like conscious experience itself, quantum information is definite, inherently private, cannot be copied or cloned, and can only partially be made available to an external observer through first-person reports or objective measurements. They further contend that this conception enables them to escape the "combination" problems of constitutive panpsychisms, and that the entire evolutionary process is driven by an ultimate consciousness or "One" that has the capacity and desire to experience and know itself by elaborating progressively more complex forms. The resulting model has much in common with Whitehead's "organismic" process metaphysics, and as shown especially clearly in the *CU* chapter's only figure it also strongly resembles the general Myers/James/Sursem framework as set forth in *BP*. Federico has recently published a book which presents his overall vision to the educated public in more detailed form (Faggin 2024), and he and D'Ariano are jointly preparing a formal textbook-level presentation designed specifically for physicists. Note that to the extent their project succeeds, it will in effect move the foundational concepts of physics in the direction of realist idealism.

Part III of *CU* provides some initial reflections on the implications of these emerging post-physicalist worldviews for consciousness science, the humanities, and philosophy. Neuroscientist David Presti first explains how an abundance of empirical data has made clear that in order for the science of consciousness to flourish, it will be necessary to expand the metaphysical stage upon which that science is conducted. There is nothing "unscientific" or even particularly difficult involved in doing that, and no fundamental scientific findings to date are threatened. It does, however, represent a true paradigm shift

in the ongoing development of science – a shift that necessarily has profound implications for how we humans view ourselves and our place in the cosmos.

Scholar of religion Jeff Kripal next expresses with passion and erudition his sense of the need for the humanities in general and religious studies in particular to resist and if possible reverse their destructive colonization by the aggressive and outmoded physicalism that has come to dominate contemporary academia and civilization generally. Only by finding and taking to heart an expanded science-based vision like that developed through our Sursem books, he believes, will his own discipline and the humanities in general recover their former academic standing and regain their full potential to exert positive influence on the shaping of future human affairs. See also Jeff's contribution to this special issue.

In *CU*'s final chapter my co-editor Paul Marshall provides a map of the conceptual territory occupied by mind–body metaphysical systems, situates the views of our contributing theoreticians within that territory, and reviews in depth and critically the relatively few philosophical approaches that seem potentially able to answer our central question – what kind of world do we live in, in order that the various kinds of phenomena surveyed in *IM, BP,* and Part I of *CU* can occur? The chapter elegantly and compactly summarizes the overall state of mind–body metaphysics, and amounts in effect to the culmination of our collective theoretical efforts up to that point in time (2021). It can profitably be studied in combination with the far more comprehensive landscape provided by Robert Lawrence Kuhn (2024), which faithfully reflects the current dominance of physicalist theorizing but also – and commendably! – devotes significant space to post-physicalist theories of the kind emphasized here.

More recent theoretical developments

A further stage in my own theoretical efforts was precipitated by the appearance in 2020 of a landmark book titled *Untying the Gordian Knot*, by space plasma physicist and process philosopher Timothy Eastman, which updates and enlarges Whitehead's organismic metaphysics in light of more recent developments in disciplines including physics, logic, mathematics, biosemiotics, and complex systems theory. Like Whitehead himself, Tim aspires to accommodate all forms of human experience, and he specifically includes the rogue phenomena catalogued in *IM*. Central to his expanded conceptual scheme is the recent confluence of several key physics research programs focused on the technical foundations and proper philosophical interpretation of quantum theory. Most critically, and building on the original work of Werner Heisenberg, these programs advocate elevation of a normally hidden realm of possibilities or *potentiae* to ontological parity with *actuality*, a move that creates a parallel in physics to the recognition by Myers, James, and Jung et al. of a normally hidden region of the psyche that is the source of the interconnected supernormal capabilities catalogued in *IM*. Tim explicitly conceives of actuality as secondary or derivative, with the experienced dimensions of space and time

undergirded by more fundamental relations of extension and succession that structure the realm of the possible. He also emphasizes that the realm of possibility is fundamentally richer than that of actuality due to its radically different (non-Boolean) operational character, and highlights Peirce's vision of triadic semiotic relations grounded in consciousness as metaphysically fundamental. He and I along with a number of others have begun exploring ways of reducing the current gaps between his framework (driven primarily by hard science) and the Myers/James/Sursem framework (driven mainly by psychology and neuroscience), focusing again on our rogue phenomena and consciousness itself as key test cases. A fourth CTR book is currently in the early stages of construction, one which we believe will move things significantly further in the direction of a detailed realist idealism of viable sort.

Additional support from some surprising new directions

The recent advances I have just described in our group's own theoretical efforts are consistent with, and supported by, significant recent developments in some neighboring academic areas. One involves theoretical biology, which is undergoing a rapid revival of concern for the "organismic" aspects of that subject. This concern was already well developed early in the twentieth century, especially in Germany, but it was temporarily pushed aside by the rise of the currently prevailing physicalist orthodoxy. Its most central and essential feature is an explicit recognition that organisms at all scales down at least to the level of single cells have capacities to detect favorable vs. unfavorable properties of their unpredictably changing environments and to make appropriate behavioral adjustments as needed (see for example Shapiro 2022, and also Kauffman and Radin 2023 who briefly survey this recent trend in theoretical biology and connect it directly with psi research). Note that this returning picture clearly entails the presence and functional significance of consciousness far deeper in the tree of life than acknowledged by contemporary neuroscience with its exclusive focus on central nervous systems, and that this is right in line with expectations clearly flowing for example from Whitehead's process philosophy and from Federico Faggin's model as described above.

As a consequence and correlate of this organismic turn in biology, a major revision of the standard Neo-Darwinian picture of evolution is also poised to emerge, one that will incorporate various modern discoveries in molecular biology and genetics (most but by no means all quite recent) by allowing for Lamarckian-style heritability of at least some characteristics acquired by individual organisms in the course of their adjustments to their specific environments (Shapiro 2022; Noble 2021). This gives both individual organisms and consciousness in general much larger roles in evolution than the current standard picture allows – a view much more in line with those held by Darwin himself as well as many others including Myers, James, Whitehead, and Faggin. Parenthetically, there is also a strong element in this story of long-standing and deliberate suppression of "heretical" *scientific* findings and opinions by

high-ranking academic defenders of the standard view, providing a potentially instructive historical parallel to the treatment of psychical research.

Last but not least, recent decades have also witnessed a remarkable renaissance of *natural theology*, leading to a profusion of serious philosophical arguments for the existence of some sort of highest consciousness at the source of things. These evolving theoretical discussions do not invariably seek to justify a "God" of the traditional monotheistic or Abrahamic sort, and in fact some of the participants appear to come very close to the sort of empirically-grounded evolutionary panentheism advocated in *BP* (see for example Craig and Moreland 2009; Hart 2024).

Conclusion

The converging developments summarized in this paper clearly show, I believe, that we are at or very near a major inflection point in Western intellectual history, with potentially viable successors to the prevailing physicalism already in view and a process underway to help us choose among them. Several are represented in this special issue, and there are numerous others as well. I cannot pretend to know which if any of the currently available contenders will ultimately prove best, but what is most important here is that they are far more similar to each other than to the prevailing physicalism, and collectively presage the emergence of a radically new and deeply improved science-based picture of the reality we humans inhabit.

Worldviews have consequences, as we have surely learned from our cumulative experience with physicalism! It is not by accident that the words "materialism" and 'idealism" connote both opposing philosophical doctrines and contrasting modes of life (not that philosophical materialists are necessarily bad people, of course, or philosophical idealists uniformly good, but there are certainly tendencies in these directions). The sort of synoptic vision that is currently struggling to emerge seems to my colleagues and me to harbor potentially tremendous practical implications – its "cash value," as William James would say – by virtue of providing humanity individually and collectively with a revised science-based worldview that is fundamentally life-affirming and optimistic, profoundly ecumenical in character, and potentially capable of addressing the multitude of societal ills and threats to our planet that can be seen as flowing directly or indirectly from the currently prevailing physicalism. What is ultimately at stake here seems nothing less than recovery, in an intellectually responsible manner, of parts of our Western cultural heritage that were prematurely discarded in conjunction with the meteoric rise of science that began four centuries ago. And what seems especially significant at this critical juncture – and the fundamental new factor that can finally enable this recovery to succeed after a number of historical failures – is that it is now being driven not only by traditional philosophic and religious concerns, amplified perhaps by our increasing horror at the overall state and direction of our global civilization, but by leading-edge developments in science itself.

What we see emerging, in short, is a middle way between the religious and scientific fundamentalisms that have dominated contemporary public discourse. This emerging vision appears both scientifically defensible and spiritually satisfying, combining the best aspects of our scientific and religious heritage in an intellectually responsible effort to reconcile these two greatest forces in human history. It can provide sustenance in particular to persons who view themselves as "spiritual but not religious," and to those who remain anchored in a traditional faith but are troubled by conflicts between specific elements of religious doctrine and findings of modern science. At the same time, and like traditional faiths, it makes room for the possibility of postmortem survival and can therefore provide comfort to persons who are facing the reality of death, whether for themselves or for loved ones such as aging parents or siblings. It can also help the large numbers of persons who have encountered powerful mystical-type experiences to make sense of their experiences and to utilize them productively in service of positive self-transformation.

The vision sketched here in barest outline provides an antidote to the prevailing postmodern disenchantment of the world and demeaning of human possibilities. It not only more accurately and fully reflects our human constitution and our place in the overall scheme of reality but engenders hope and encourages ego-surpassing forms of human flourishing. It offers reasons for us to believe that freedom is real, that our conscious choices matter, and that we have barely scratched the surface of our latent human potentials. It also addresses the urgent need for a greater sense of worldwide community and interdependence – a sustainable *ethos* – by showing that under the surface we and the world are much more deeply and widely interconnected than previously realized.

Our individual and collective human fates in these dangerous and difficult times – indeed, the fate of our precious planet and all of its passengers – may ultimately hinge upon wider recognition and more effective utilization of the expanded states of being that are potentially available to us, but largely ignored or even actively suppressed by our struggling postmodern civilization with its strange mixture of self-aggrandizing individualism and fundamentalist tribalisms. Availability of an improved worldview does not guarantee its acceptance, of course, and even widespread acceptance would not guarantee that its potential benefits will be fully realized, or its potential abuses adequately controlled. But a conception of reality much richer than the prevailing physicalism – one that is greatly superior in human terms and at the same time *more* consistent with leading-edge science – is now definitely within reach.

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Ed Keli

Duhovnost i svest: nova vizija za dvadeset prvi vek

Apstrakt

Porast nauke tokom protekla četiri veka nesumnjivo je doneo izuzetna intelektualna i praktična dostignuća, ali je, može se tvrditi, takođe doprineo nizu ozbiljnih i sve gorih društvenih problema, uključujući destruktivnu komercijalnu eksploataciju prirodnih resursa naše planete sa njenim kumulativnim negativnim posledicama po životnu sredinu i globalnu klimu; neprekidnu komodifikaciju, marketing i potrošnju; ekstremnu i rastuću nejednakost u raspodeli bogatstva i mogućnosti; prevlast transakcionih, „nulto-sumnih" pristupa odnosima na svim nivoima, od pojedinaca do država; raširenu militarizam i stalno prisutnu pretnju nuklearne katastrofe; kao i sveopšti „odčarani" karakter savremene civilizacije. Brojni društveni komentatori povezali su ove probleme, direktno ili indirektno, sa dubokim raskolom između nauke i duhovnosti, koji su tokom proteklog veka posebno podsticali zagovornici fizikalizma – filozofske doktrine ukorenjene u fizici kasnog devetnaestog veka, koja tvrdi da govori u ime nauke u celini i koja u našim duhovnim tradicijama ne vidi ništa drugo do iracionalne ostatke našeg intelektualnog detinjstva. U ovom radu opisaću kako se otvorio put ka radikalno drugačijoj, ali i dalje naučno zasnovanoj slici stvarnosti, onoj koja svest postavlja kao ontološki fundamentalnu i koja afirmiše ljudska duhovna iskustva i sposobnosti, koja je doslednija savremenoj nauci nego sam fizikalizam i koja potencijalno može pomoći da se naša posrnula moderna civilizacija spreči da u budnom stanju sklizne u sopstveno uništenje.

Ključne reči: svest, duhovnost, fizikalizam, dualizam, dualno-aspektni monizam, idealizam, teorija mozga/uma, psihička istraživanja, iskustvo bliske smrti, mistična iskustva